

challenging Rice to imagine the day after an attack posits a strike that kills “hundreds” of Americans. He did not write “thousands.”

Institutionalizing Imagination: The Case of Aircraft as Weapons

Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies. For example, before Pearl Harbor the U.S. government had excellent intelligence that a Japanese attack was coming, especially after peace talks stalemated at the end of November 1941. These were days, one historian notes, of “excruciating uncertainty.” The most likely targets were judged to be in Southeast Asia. An attack was coming, “but officials were at a loss to know where the blow would fall or what more might be done to prevent it.”¹¹ In retrospect, available intercepts pointed to Japanese examination of Hawaii as a possible target. But, another historian observes, “in the face of a clear warning, alert measures bowed to routine.”¹²

It is therefore crucial to find a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination. Doing so requires more than finding an expert who can imagine that aircraft could be used as weapons. Indeed, since al Qaeda and other groups had already used suicide vehicles, namely truck bombs, the leap to the use of other vehicles such as boats (the *Cole* attack) or planes is not far-fetched.

Yet these scenarios were slow to work their way into the thinking of aviation security experts. In 1996, as a result of the TWA Flight 800 crash, President Clinton created a commission under Vice President Al Gore to report on shortcomings in aviation security in the United States. The Gore Commission’s report, having thoroughly canvassed available expertise in and outside of government, did not mention suicide hijackings or the use of aircraft as weapons. It focused mainly on the danger of placing bombs onto aircraft—the approach of the Manila air plot. The Gore Commission did call attention, however, to lax screening of passengers and what they carried onto planes.

In late 1998, reports came in of a possible al Qaeda plan to hijack a plane. One, a December 4 Presidential Daily Briefing for President Clinton (reprinted in chapter 4), brought the focus back to more traditional hostage taking; it reported Bin Ladin’s involvement in planning a hijack operation to free prisoners such as the “Blind Sheikh,” Omar Abdel Rahman. Had the contents of this PDB been brought to the attention of a wider group, including key members of Congress, it might have brought much more attention to the need for permanent changes in domestic airport and airline security procedures.¹³

Threat reports also mentioned the possibility of using an aircraft filled with explosives. The most prominent of these mentioned a possible plot to fly an explosives-laden aircraft into a U.S. city. This report, circulated in September 1998, originated from a source who had walked into an American consulate in East Asia. In August of the same year, the intelligence community had received information that a group of Libyans hoped to crash a plane into the